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Sears, Tim A

From: Evans, Ann M

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Subject: Interrogation Videos, WT: Bush Letter to Kim; AP: Seeking Russia's Backing +

CIA Destroyed Videos Showing Interrogations

Harsh Techniques Seen in 2002 Tapes

By Dan Eggen and Joby Warrick
Washington Post Staff Writers
Friday, December 7, 2007; A01

The CIA made videotapes in 2002 of its officers administering harsh interrogation techniques to two al-Qaeda suspects but destroyed the tapes three years later, CIA Director Michael V. Hayden said yesterday.

Captured on tape were interrogations of Abu Zubaydah, a close associate of Osama bin Laden, and a second high-level al-Qaeda member who was not identified, according to two intelligence officials. Zubaydah has been identified by U.S. officials familiar with the interrogations as one of three al-Qaeda suspects who were subjected to "waterboarding," a technique that simulates drowning, while in CIA custody.

The tapes were made to document any confessions the two men might make and to serve as an internal check on how the interrogations were conducted, senior intelligence officials said.

All the tapes were destroyed in November 2005 on the order of Jose A. Rodriguez Jr., then the CIA's director of clandestine operations, officials said. The destruction came after the Justice Department had told a federal judge in the case of al-Qaeda operative Zacarias Moussaoui that the CIA did not possess videotapes of a specific set of interrogations sought by his attorneys. A CIA spokesman said yesterday that the request would not have covered the destroyed tapes.

The tapes also were not provided to the Sept. 11 commission, the independent panel that investigated the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which demanded a wide array of material and relied heavily on classified interrogation transcripts in piecing together its narrative of events.

The startling disclosures came on the same day that House and Senate negotiators reached an agreement on legislation that would prohibit the use of waterboarding and other harsh interrogation tactics by the CIA and bring intelligence agencies in line with rules followed by the U.S. military.

The measure, which needs approval from the full House and Senate, would effectively set a government-wide standard for legal interrogations by explicitly outlawing the use of simulated drowning, forced nudity, hooding, military dogs and other harsh tactics against prisoners by any U.S. intelligence agency.

The proposed ban sets the stage for a potential election-season standoff between congressional

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Democrats and the Bush administration, which has fought vigorously on Capitol Hill and in the courts to preserve intelligence agencies' ability to use aggressive interrogation techniques against terrorism suspects.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto warned that the administration had threatened to veto similar legislation proposed in the House.

In a note to agency employees yesterday, Hayden said that the decision to destroy the videotapes was made to protect the identities of CIA officers who were clearly identifiable on them.

"Beyond their lack of intelligence value -- as the interrogation sessions had already been exhaustively detailed in written channels -- and the absence of any legal or internal reason to keep them, the tapes posed a security risk," Hayden said. "Were they ever to leak, they would permit identification of your CIA colleagues who had served in the program, exposing them to and their families to retaliation from al-Qaeda and its sympathizers."

Hayden said he decided to discuss the tapes publicly because of news media interest and the possibility that "we may see misinterpretations of the facts in the days ahead." The New York Times said on its Web site that it had informed the CIA on Wednesday night that it was preparing a story about the destroyed tapes.

Agency officials declined to describe the contents of the tapes, but knowledgeable U.S. officials said they depicted hours of interrogations of the two men, both of whom were subjected to aggressive interrogation methods. Whether the tapes show waterboarding or any other specific techniques is not clear.

The existence of the tapes was revealed to congressional oversight committees, and Congress was also informed about the decision to destroy the tapes, two senior intelligence officials said. The CIA was headed by former GOP congressman Porter J. Goss at the time.

But Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said in a statement last night that lawmakers did not learn about the destruction of the tapes for another year.

"While we were provided with very limited information about the existence of the tapes, we were not consulted on their usage nor the decision to destroy the tapes," Rockefeller said.

Civil liberties advocates denounced the CIA's decision to destroy the tapes, saying the agency should have known by 2005 that the actions depicted on them were potentially the subject of litigation and congressional investigations.

Jameel Jaffer, a national security lawyer at the American Civil Liberties Union, said the tapes were destroyed at a time when a federal court had ordered the CIA to comply with a Freedom of Information Act request by the ACLU seeking records related to interrogations.

"The CIA appears to have deliberately destroyed evidence that would have allowed its agents to be held accountable for the torture of prisoners," Jaffer said. "They are tapes that should have been released to the courts and Congress, but the CIA apparently believes that its agents are above the law."

Whether the agency faces potential legal jeopardy depends on timing -- specifically, whether

investigations into the interrogation practices had been launched when the tapes were destroyed, said A. John Radsan, a former federal prosecutor and CIA assistant general counsel.

"Once an investigation has begun -- whether it's an attorney general or an inspector general investigation -- it's much more problematic to have destroyed any kinds of documents or tapes that fall within the scope of the investigation," Radsan said.

U.S. District Judge Leonie M. Brinkema of Alexandria ordered the CIA in 2003 to turn over tapes of terrorists whose testimony might be relevant to Moussaoui's defense. Moussaoui briefly trained to become one of the hijackers in the Sept. 11 attacks but was taken into custody before they occurred.

The Justice Department revealed in a letter to Brinkema and an appeals court judge in October that the CIA's previous claims had been wrong and that it had found two videotapes and one audiotape of unidentified detainee interrogations. Those tapes still exist, prosecutors said in a court filing.

CIA spokesman Mark Mansfield said the tapes acknowledged by Hayden "did not involve anyone judged relevant by the court in the Moussaoui proceedings."

Mansfield also said that the CIA did not withhold evidence from the Sept. 11 commission, contending that its members did not ask specifically for tapes. "The tapes were destroyed only when it was determined that they were no longer of intelligence value and not relevant to any internal, legislative or judicial inquiries," he said.

Zubaydah was captured in March 2002, becoming the first of the "high-value" detainees in CIA custody and the first to be subjected to harsh interrogation methods, which included sleep deprivation as well as waterboarding. Zubaydah, who was shot and gravely wounded during his capture, later became "defiant and evasive," according to Hayden, leading to the decision to apply more aggressive measures.

Hayden said the methods shown on the videotapes were legal under guidelines approved by the Justice Department and the Bush administration, and he said the interrogation provided "crucial information."

Intelligence officials have acknowledged that the CIA used waterboarding on three prisoners after the 2001 attacks but say the agency stopped the practice in 2003. The technique was revived as a political issue in recent months during the confirmation process for Attorney General Michael B. Mukasey, who refused to say whether waterboarding is considered torture under U.S. law. Most Senate Democrats voted against his nomination as a result, giving Mukasey the lowest level of Senate support of any attorney general in the past half-century.

The waterboarding ban was added to the 2008 intelligence authorization bill through an amendment offered by one of the few Democrats to support Mukasey, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.). Under the amendment, no prisoner in U.S. custody "shall be subject to any treatment or technique of interrogation not authorized by the United States Army Field Manual."

The Army field manual on interrogations was amended last year to explicitly prohibit eight aggressive and controversial interrogation tactics, including some methods used on military prisoners at the Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq and the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The manual also singles out the use of waterboarding.

"The national debate over torture will end if this amendment to place the CIA under the Army Field Manual becomes law," Feinstein said in a statement.

But Sen. Christopher S. Bond (R-Mo.) accused Democrats of trying "to kill an important tool in our efforts to fight terror."

Staff writer Walter Pincus and staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

Washington Times Article published Dec 7, 2007

Bush letter to Kim urges full nuke disclosure

December 7, 2007

By Nicholas Kralev - President Bush warned North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in a letter this week that failure by his regime to disclose all past and present nuclear-related activities would stall international efforts to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, White House officials said yesterday.

Christopher R. Hill, the chief U.S. negotiator with the North who delivered the letter to North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Ui-chun in Pyongyang on Tuesday, said the North Koreans are resisting the disclosure of centrifuges acquired from Pakistan, presumably for use in a uranium-enrichment program.

Mr. Bush's letter, beginning with "Dear Mr. Chairman," is his first personal contact with a leader he once said he loathed, and his most direct intervention in complex negotiations aimed at ending Pyongyang's nuclear program.

"President Bush sent a letter to Kim Jong-il that urged the North Koreans to fully declare their nuclear programs, as called for in the September 2005 six-party agreement," said Gordon Johndroe, spokesman for the National Security Council at the White House.

The 2005 deal, which committed North Korea to abandoning its nuclear ambitions, was the first breakthrough in talks involving the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia.

Mr. Bush sent the letter, dated Dec. 1, to show he is fully behind Mr. Hill's efforts, U.S. officials said. He sent similar letters to the leaders of all other countries engaged in the talks, Mr. Johndroe said.

The North promised to disable its main nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and provide a full and correct declaration of its programs and materials by the end of the year.

Mr. Hill, after refusing to share specifics about the problematic elements of the declaration, confirmed recent reports in The Washington Times that North Korea is reluctant to disclose its acquisition of centrifuges.

"We have consistently maintained, and I would say with very good evidence coming from

more than one source, that they made some purchases of materials and equipment entirely consistent with a gas centrifuge program — materials including means to build gas centrifuges, patterning them after the Pakistani model that we also have information that they received," he said.

Analysts say the centrifuges are the basic equipment needed to enrich uranium. The source of the centrifuges, according to U.S. intelligence, is the shadowy network of A.Q. Khan, the father of the Pakistani atomic bomb, in the 1990s.

Even though the North Koreans received only about 20 centrifuges — a fully fledged program usually requires thousands — they were enough to give the North the know-how to produce many more.

U.S. officials are concerned that centrifuges no longer in the North's possession may have ended up in a third country, possibly Syria, where Israel bombed what it described as a nuclear-related facility in September.

"We are not playing a game of 'got you.' We are not trying to create new problems. We are trying to resolve issues and move on," Mr. Hill told reporters in Beijing yesterday.

During discussions in Pyongyang earlier this week, North Koreans listed "fewer elements than I would have liked to see," Mr. Hill said. "We want to be completely sure that they don't have any ongoing program. ... We want to know what they have been up to in the past."

U.S. officials said Mr. Bush's letter to Mr. Kim also calls for full disclosure of the exact amount of weapons-grade nuclear material the North has produced, as well as the number of weapons.

Once the North provides the declaration and disables the Yongbyon reactor, it will start receiving energy and other economic assistance.

U.S. officials suggested yesterday that both the declaration and the formal completion of Yongbyon's disablement might not meet the Dec. 31 deadline, saying they prefer a tardy rather than incomplete list.

"It's going to take a monumental effort to get all of this done by the end of the year, and I'm not too concerned about whether it is December 31 or not," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said during a trip to Europe.

Rice Seeks Russian Backing on Iran

By MATTHEW LEE

Associated Press Writer

BRUSSELS, Belgium (AP) -

Armed with the full support of NATO allies, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will try to convince a skeptical

Russia that it should back U.S. plans to step up pressure on Iran to suspend its nuclear activities.

Having won NATO endorsement to stay the course despite a new U.S. intelligence assessment that concludes Iran stopped its atomic weapons development program in 2003, Rice was to meet Friday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who has become the public face of opposition to new U.N. sanctions.

On the sidelines of a NATO meeting already beset by alliance differences with Russia over U.S. plans for European missile defense and troop deployments in Europe, Rice and Lavrov were to discuss Washington's surprising revision of its view of Iranian nuclear intentions. The National Intelligence Estimate, released Monday, credited intense diplomatic activity for Iran's decision on weapons.

"The point that I'm emphasizing to people is that it was international pressure that got the Iranians to halt their program," Rice said.

"This suggests that you ought to keep up that international pressure," she told reporters on her way to Belgium for her first face-to-face talks on the matter with foreign officials since the intelligence report became public.

NATO members agreed, reaching consensus over a working dinner Thursday that their policy toward Iran "should not change," Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht said, noting that existing offers of nuclear cooperation with Iran if it stops enriching and reprocessing uranium.

"There was unanimity around the table that there is a clear choice for Iran," British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told reporters on Friday. "Iran can see the outstretched hand from the international community if they are willing to join the drive against proliferation.

"But if Iran persists on defying the will of the United Nations Security Council, then there must be further sanctions," he said.

The comments came after the leaders of NATO allies France and Germany called for the continuation of the two-pronged approach of pressure and negotiations with Iran.

"I think we are in a process and that Iran continues to pose a danger," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in Paris at a joint news conference with French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

"The threat exists," Sarkozy said.

But Lavrov on Wednesday said Moscow had not seen any evidence that Iran had, in fact, ever had a nuclear weapons program, not even one that it had given up on four years ago. He also criticized the United States for its missile defense plans.

Still, along with China, which also has opposed new U.N. sanctions, Russia appeared isolated on Iran, which long has denied it is seeking nuclear weapons and crowed that the U.S. intelligence report was a total "victory" for the country.

Rice said she saw no reason for major policy moves.

"I don't see that the NIE changes the course that we're on," she said.

"In fact, I would think given the assessment that Iran is indeed susceptible to coordinated international pressure that (this) is the right approach," she said.

The U.S. has been successful in leading two rounds of U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran and is pushing for a third set of economic sanctions if the country refuses to suspend uranium enrichment.

Ahead of formal alliance meetings on Friday, Rice met Thursday with the foreign ministers of Italy, Belgium and Britain, as well as European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana and NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

On Friday she sees German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as well as Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. Israeli officials say Iran is still working aggressively to build nuclear arms, despite the new U.S. conclusions. The Islamic regime in Tehran strongly opposes Israel's existence and frequently boasts of its ability to strike the Jewish state with long-range missiles.

Bush administration officials concede that the findings of the new intelligence estimate could hurt their efforts to impose more sanctions on Iran to increase pressure for it to cease uranium enrichment and reprocessing, which could produce the ingredients for a bomb.

Discussions on that point, between the U.S. and the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council - Britain, France, Russia and China - plus Germany in the "P5 plus one" grouping had been on hold pending consideration of the new intelligence.

Ahead of the NATO decision, Rice said she would impress on her counterparts the need for Iran to disclose the nature of its alleged secret nuclear weapons program prior to 2003, returning to a theme addressed Wednesday by President Bush.

"We should also start to look at ways for Iran to account for what was happening before 2003," she said, without elaboration on what type of mechanism she had in mind, if any.

Bush on Wednesday demanded that Tehran detail its previous program to develop nuclear weapons - "which the Iranian regime has yet to acknowledge."

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FBI: Gitmo Detainee Was With Bin Laden

By BEN FOX

Associated Press Writer

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba (AP) -

A Yemeni admitted he was a driver for Osama bin Laden and knew of the al-Qaida leader's role in the Sept. 11 attack, an FBI agent testified Thursday, countering defense assertions that the detainee was a minor employee with no role in terrorism.

Salim Ahmed Hamdan told FBI agents that he had chauffeured bin Laden around Afghanistan in an al-Qaida convoy after Sept. 11 and overheard the leader say he had expected only up to 1,500 people to be killed in the attack, Special Agent George Crouch said.

"When Osama bin Laden learned it was much larger than that he was very pleased," Crouch recalled Hamdan telling him and two other FBI agents during one of a dozen interrogation sessions at Guantanamo in the summer of 2002.

The testimony, which revealed more about the allegations against Hamdan than previously known, came in a pretrial hearing to determine whether the detainee can be prosecuted before the first U.S. military tribunals since the World War II era. Hamdan, who has been held at Guantanamo Bay for nearly six years, is charged with conspiracy and supporting terrorism.

The two-day hearing ended late Thursday with the judge saying he would issue a written ruling later after he returns to his office in Washington.

Prosecutors called witnesses to bolster their case that Hamdan is an unlawful enemy combatant eligible to face the special court. The defense maintains he was only one of several drivers for bin Laden and had no knowledge or role in any terrorist attacks.

Defense lawyers want him declared a prisoner of war, which would entitle him to greater legal protections than those now afforded to prisoners at Guantanamo who are designated as "unlawful enemy combatants."

Crouch said Hamdan left his native Yemen in 1996 to become an Islamic fighter in the former Soviet state of Tajikistan. After failing to get in, Hamdan ended up in Afghanistan, where he was hired as driver by bin Laden and later became a member of the leader's security detachment, the agent said.

Just before the 1998 al-Qaida bombings of the U.S. embassies in the East African nations of Tanzania and Kenya, Hamdan helped evacuate bin Laden's compound in Afghanistan, at the orders of superiors who feared retaliation, Crouch testified.

"This was going to be the first time Osama bin Laden was going to go toe-to-toe or face-to-face with the United States and he was unsure what the reaction would be," the agent said.

Hamdan also knew of bin Laden's involvement in the attack on the USS Cole in 2000 and drove the al-Qaida leader to a news conference at which he warned of an impending attack, Crouch said.

Earlier, a U.S. Army officer described Hamdan's capture, saying he wasn't wearing a uniform when he was captured in November 2001 in Afghanistan while driving a car with two surface-to-air missiles inside. The testimony was intended to underscore the U.S. contention that Hamdan was not a traditional soldier deserving POW status.

Defense lawyers used cross examination of the officer to point out that many Afghan fighters under U.S. command did not wear what might be considered typical military garb and that no other weapons were found in Hamdan's car - even though he had a permit from the Taliban to carry a sidearm. They also noted Hamdan did not resist capture.

Robert McFadden, a Department of Defense agent who interrogated the detainee in May 2003, said the Hamdan drove bin Laden's son, Uthman, at least once with the al-Qaida leader. Hamdan, who is now about 37, was paid \$200 to \$300 a month plus \$100 for housing, he said.

The defense plans to call a college professor who has studied al-Qaida and says there were minor associates who had no real role in terrorism, but Crouch said the FBI believed Hamdan could not have been ignorant of the group's workings.

"It didn't make sense to us as investigators that an individual assigned to drive Osama bin Laden, and be so close, would not be part of al-Qaida or have understanding of inner workings of al-Qaida," Crouch said.

The FBI agent and the Army major were the first witnesses to testify at a Guantanamo hearing since Congress and the Bush administration last year came up with new rules for military trials, known as commissions, after the U.S. Supreme Court tossed out the old version.

On Wednesday, the military judge presiding at the hearing rejected a defense request to talk to the alleged mastermind of the Sept. 11 attack and two other "high value" detainees who are also prisoners at this isolated Navy base.

Hamdan, who wore a flowing white robe and a gray-checkered sports coat at the hearing, faces up to life in prison if tried and convicted.

He was first charged more than three years ago. But his prosecution has been delayed by legal challenges, including one he filed that went to the Supreme Court and resulted in the striking down last year of the original rules for military tribunals.

The U.S. now holds about 305 prisoners here on suspicion of terrorism or links to al-Qaida and the Taliban and plans to prosecute about 80. So far, only three detainees have been formally charged and one, Australian David Hicks, was convicted in a plea bargain and sent home.

Iran Hangs Man Despite Review Order

By NASSER KARIMI

Associated Press Writer

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) - A man convicted of raping three boys when he was 13 years old has been hanged despite a chief justice's order that the case be reviewed, the his lawyer and a U.S. rights group said Thursday.

Makwan Moloudzadeh was executed late Tuesday and his family told to pick up his body for burial Wednesday, the Human Rights Watch said.

"We were expecting an order for retrial by the Supreme Court," Saeed Egbali, the lawyer for Moloudzadeh, told The Associated Press. "There would have been no harm in a retrial and it could have saved a life."

Authorities detained Moloudzadeh in 2006 on charges he had sexual intercourse with three teenagers, all under 18, in the Iranian Kurdish town of Paveh, some 440 miles west of Tehran.

The charges stemmed from complaints raised by the teenagers' families claiming Moloudzadeh had committed the rape eight years ago.

During the trial in a court in the nearby city of Kermanshah, Moloudzadeh tried unsuccessfully to revoke his earlier confession to the crime, which he said was extracted under coercion. His lawyer said that after the verdict, the plaintiffs dropped their accusations.

"But the judges issued verdict only based on their own understanding," Egbali said. "Under the law, even if Makwan had confessed four times, it should not have mattered because he was not of (legal) age at the time of the crime."

In November, the head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi ordered Moloudzadeh's death sentence be suspended and ordered a retrial, saying the initial verdict was against the law, Egbali said.

But the case, which was supposed to be reviewed in Tehran, was sent back to Kermanshah, where local judicial authorities speedily approved the execution, and it was "carried out quickly," the lawyer said.

Egbali said the case was full of ambiguities, including a lack of investigation and evidence, and said he would sue the judges on behalf of Makwan's parents if they decide they want to.

Clarissa Bencomo, of New York-based Human Rights Watch, said the case was based on no forensic evidence and relied only on the plaintiffs' accusations.

Human Rights Watch has "spoken to individuals who have seen the body and the burial," she said from Cairo. The family was "very distraught," she added.

The family and lawyer were not given notice 24 hours before the execution as required by law, Bencomo said.

"The local judicial authorities ordered the execution contravening the chief justice's order," Bencomo said. "We are calling for a formal investigation both into the contravention of the judicial order and on authorities to bring to justice those who carried out the execution."

Iran this year has hanged dozens of people convicted of rape, robbery and kidnapping.

The London-based rights group Amnesty International says Iran has executed five people under 18 in 2007, and 27 since 1990.

Associated Press Writer Katarina Kratovac in Cairo, Egypt, contributed to this report.

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UN Chief Warns Darfur Force Is at Risk

By EDITH M. LEDERER

Associated Press Writer

UNITED NATIONS (AP) - U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned Thursday that a new peacekeeping force for Darfur could fail unless it gets 24 critically needed helicopters and he appealed to all countries for help.

Ban urged U.N. Security Council members to use their influence to turn international concern for Darfur into concrete offers of aircraft.

"While helicopters alone cannot ensure the success of the mission, their absence may well doom it to failure," he said in a letter to Council members.

With only three weeks left before the 26,000-member U.N.-African Union force is scheduled to start deploying, Ban lamented the U.N.'s failure to get a commitment for even one helicopter.

Ban said he had personally contacted every country with the potential to contribute a helicopter - from industrialized to major developing nations - "to no avail."

He said he was sending two high-level envoys to a summit of European Union and African leaders in Lisbon, Portugal, this weekend "to directly engage with as many key leaders as possible on this subject."

"We are at the critical moment for Darfur," Ban said. "Member states have spoken clearly about what must be done. It is time for them to walk their talk."

The conflict in Sudan's western Darfur region has claimed more than 200,000 lives and uprooted 2.5 million people since ethnic African rebels took up arms against the Arab-dominated government in 2003. Critics accuse Sudan of arming the janjaweed Arab militias that have terrorized Darfur villages - a charge Khartoum denies.

Ban said the 18 transport helicopters and six light tactical helicopters are essential for "an effective, robust force."

"Without effective, efficient mobility and capacity, we will not be able to protect the civilians and even our own soldiers," he said.

The U.N. chief stressed that rebel leaders would not join the peace process without an effective peacekeeping force.

"But for this we need on-the-ground capability - specifically helicopters. We are not getting them. Because of that the entire mission is at risk," Ban said.

The U.N. assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping, Edmond Mulet, and his deputy chief of staff, Kim Won-soo, were dispatched to the European Union-African summit in Portugal. They will also press Sudan's leaders to accept non-Africans in the AU-U.N. peacekeeping force, Ban said.

At Sudan's insistence, the U.N. Security Council agreed the force would be predominantly African. But the Sudanese government has refused to approve non-African units from Thailand, Nepal and Nordic countries.

Ban said he would send a personal letter to Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir with the envoys.

Sudan's U.N. ambassador, Abdalmahmood Abdalhaleem Mohamad, said the U.N. delegation will meet the Sudanese foreign minister and if time permits, the president. He insisted Sudan was committed to "dialogue and transparency" and would "deliver on our commitments."

In a letter to Ban obtained by The Associated Press, the Sudanese ambassador addressed some problems raised last week by U.N. peacekeeping chief Jean-Marie Guehenno, who warned that Sudan was putting up numerous obstacles that could destroy the force's effectiveness.

Mohamad did not address the dispute over the force's composition, but he said the issue of land for the force's operations has been resolved and the government had approved night flights for medical evacuations.

Guehenno had criticized Sudan for proposing a Status of Forces Agreement that "would make it impossible for the mission to operate."

The agreement includes a proposal to allow Sudan's government to "temporarily disable the communications network" during security operations to protect the country's sovereignty. Another proposal would require the peacekeeping force to provide "advance notification to the government for all staff, troop and asset movements," Guehenno said.

Mohamad said the agreement was under discussion.

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Presidential Pardon: Workers Get Christmas Eve Off

By Stephen Barr
Friday, December 7, 2007; D04

It's an early holiday gift for most federal employees.

President Bush yesterday issued an executive order closing the federal government on Christmas Eve, a Monday.

Federal employees are "excused from duty" that day, except for those employees who agencies determine should be at work "for reasons of national security or defense or other public need," the order says.

"President Bush acknowledges the important contributions America's federal employees make each day to ensure the success and security of our nation," Linda M. Springer, the director of the Office of Personnel Management and Bush's chief civil service adviser, said in a statement. "So in the spirit of the season, President Bush is making it possible for these dedicated Americans to spend this precious four-day period with family and friends."

E-mails have whizzed across the government in recent days as employees tried to figure out whether Bush would grant them a day off on Christmas Eve, as he did in 2001, when Dec. 24 also fell on a Monday. The topic even popped up Wednesday on Federal Diary Live, a discussion session on <http://washingtonpost.com>.

The extra holiday probably will not hurt productivity in most federal offices, because many employees schedule time off from work in the holiday season. Bush's order may spill over to some nonprofit organizations and companies that take their cue from the government on when to open and close.

But many federal employees will be at work during the holidays, including the weekends before and after Christmas. They are classified as essential or emergency employees, and they help staff command centers at the departments of Defense and Homeland Security and other agencies.

The OPM said the executive order does not apply to Postal Service employees, in part because the agency operates independently of the civil service and because mail carriers will be putting in long hours delivering holiday cards and packages on the 24th.

Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon and Carter also gave employees the entire day off when

Christmas Eve landed on a Monday. Ronald Reagan approved three hours of excused absence, and George Bush the Elder gave employees a half-day holiday in 1990.

Federal Jobs Go Google

The government is opening up a large part of its jobs database to major search engines to make it easier for more Americans to look for employment with Uncle Sam.

People interested in federal employment can type in job titles on Google and see links to federal job openings alongside similar positions being offered by companies and nonprofit organizations.

The Office of Personnel Management operates USAJobs, a Web portal that attracts about 10 million visitors each month who can sort through about 60,000 announcements posted by federal agencies. More than 2 million Americans have filed their résumés on USAJobs.

But OPM officials said that many college students and others are not aware of the federal Web portal, and that providing electronic feeds of the job listings to major search engines will make it easier for Americans to search and apply for work in the government.

"Those that are so good at surfing the Net, this is going to catch some of those people," said *Kay Ely*, an associate director at OPM.

Many government jobs are closed to applicants from outside the civil service because of requirements for certain types of experience or to provide promotions for career staff. The job advertisements fed by OPM to the search engines will only include job positions open to the public, which should be 35,000 to 40,000 a month, said *Steve Connelly*, program director for USAJobs.

OPM has partnered with Google on the project's launch, and officials hope to have a fully operational system in place in January and to sign up other search engines.

Retirements

Joseph D. O'Connell Jr., director of public affairs at the International Broadcasting Bureau, will retire Dec. 22 after more than 40 years of federal service.

O'Connell served as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1967, as a Foreign Service officer in Brazil and Washington from 1970 to 1979 and, since 1989, has been the spokesman for the Voice of America, a part of the broadcasting bureau. On Dec. 4, he was presented with the bureau's highest award, the Distinguished Honor Award.

Annette Hanopole, a grants management officer and branch chief at the National Institutes of Health, will retire Jan. 3 after 32 years of federal service.

Talk Shows

Art Gordon, president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, and *Jon Adler*, the group's executive vice president, will be the guests on "FedTalk" at 11 a.m. today on <http://federalnewsradio.com> and WFED radio (1050 AM).

Jerry Friedman, executive director of the American Public Human Services Association, will be the guest on the IBM "Business of Government Hour" at 9 a.m. tomorrow on WJFK radio (106.7 FM).

Stephen Barr's e-mail address is sbarrs@washpost.com.

A Mountain of Competing Plans Make Open Enrollment Dizzying

By Stephen Barr
Thursday, December 6, 2007; D04

The health insurance program for federal employees and retirees is all about choice and competition, and there seems to be plenty in this open enrollment season.

For 2008, the program offers 283 health plans -- national plans and local health maintenance organizations -- with most employees and retirees eligible to join from a dozen to 20 plans, depending on where they live and their occupation. Most plans are open to all, but some specialize in providing medical coverage to specific groups, such as intelligence and law enforcement employees.

While it is easy to spot the choices available in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, it is harder to see the competition among the plans. That's partly because the Office of Personnel Management, which administers the FEHBP, discourages plans from drawing comparisons with competitors or marketing against one another.

But the insurance plans do compete, and a number appear to have stepped up their efforts to add subscribers and tout their services. For example:

Â¿ Aetna is calling attention to its launch of an online, interactive "personal health record" that the company hopes will help enrollees take better stock of their health care.

A search engine scans claims information, such as doctor visits and diagnostic treatments and prescriptions, and, if necessary, alerts enrollees about possible problems or opportunities to improve care. Enrollees also may enter family health histories, immunization records, allergies and other data into their records.

Â¿ The American Postal Workers Union has been reminding union members that its collective bargaining agreement with the U.S. Postal Service means the agency will pay 95 percent of the premium next year for enrollees in the APWU Health Plan consumer-driven option.

As a general rule, the government pays for about 75 percent of the overall cost of each FEHBP plan, up to a maximum amount set by a complex formula. The maximum contribution for next year is about \$3,800 for individuals and \$8,600 for families. Enrollees shoulder the cost of premiums above the government's share, and their premium share can be much higher for the more expensive plans in FEHBP.

Â¿ The Association Benefit Plan is available only to civilian employees of the intelligence community and the FBI and retirees of the CIA. The plan features a "best doctors" program and discounts on

dental, vision and hearing services.

The best doctors program permits enrollees to obtain a second opinion on serious medical conditions from top specialists, who recommend a change in treatment about 60 percent of the time and challenge the initial diagnosis about 20 percent of the time, according to plan officials.

Â¿ The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association points to its national federation of 39 independent companies and its huge share of the federal market -- about 4.7 million employees, retirees and family members of the nearly 8 million Americans covered by FEHBP.

For 2008, the Blue Cross standard option and the basic option will add coverage for hearing aids for children and will improve ambulance benefits.

Â¿ The Government Employees Health Association emphasizes that premiums are not changing for its standard option and high-deductible health plans, and that it offers a vision benefit with GEHA health and dental plans.

Â¿ Kaiser Permanente has announced there will be no co-payment for preventive services, and it will provide generic drugs at lower cost in 2008.

Preventive services include routine physicals, well-child exams, mammograms and Pap smears, routine immunizations, and prostate and colorectal cancer screenings. Co-pays for preventive services cost \$30 for adults this year at Kaiser.

The health plan also continues to improve electronic services, which permit Kaiser enrollees to schedule and cancel doctor appointments, send e-mail to their doctors and print out their health histories. An electronic medical record, launched in 2003, is being improved in phases, according to the company.

Â¿ The Mail Handlers Benefit Plan will offer a new "value option" next year that the company calls the lowest-priced plan in the FEHBP.

The value option offers 100 percent coverage for preventive care, including screenings, immunizations, and maternity and well-child care. It operates as a national fee-for-service preferred provider plan.

There are many other choices in FEHBP for next year. Some plans will be reducing premiums, some will be increasing co-pays and deductibles, and a number are repackaging benefits to make them more attractive.

Comparing plans is difficult, and experts recommend studying plan brochures and using the OPM benefits guide, which permits online comparisons of up to four plans at a time. The annual guide to health plans published by Washington Consumers' Checkbook magazine provides detailed information about how FEHBP works, compares the total costs of plans and makes recommendations on how to shop wisely for health care.

This weekend will be the last chance for such homework. The open season ends on Monday.

Stephen Barr's e-mail address is isbarrs@washpost.com.

Bush gives feds extra Christmas holiday

By Brittany R. Ballenstedt bballenstedt@govexec.com December 6, 2007

President Bush on Thursday ordered executive branch agencies to close on Monday, Dec. 24, giving most federal employees a four-day Christmas weekend.

Agency heads still have the authority to order some essential employees to their posts on the day after Christmas, according to Bush's executive order.

Historically, presidents have granted an extra day or half-day of vacation when Christmas falls on a Tuesday or Thursday. Last year, when Christmas fell on a Monday, no extra time off was awarded.

The last time federal employees were granted an extra day off on Dec. 24 was 2001, when Christmas fell on a Tuesday. Since 1956, Christmas has fallen on a Tuesday only seven times. The only presidents not to grant employees the full day off were Ronald Reagan, who allowed supervisors to let workers leave up to three hours early, and George H.W. Bush, who gave employees a half-day off.

Employees were extended an extra day off around the holidays earlier this year, though the extra time was not holiday-related. President Bush closed government agencies on Jan. 2 to observe the death of former President Gerald Ford.

Federal employees may also be in line to receive an additional day off at Christmas next year. Because 2008 is a leap year, Christmas falls on a Thursday.

Now, how about an extra day at New Year's Eve, which also falls on a Monday? Don't hold your breath. The last time feds got an extra day at New Year's was in 1973, when President Nixon gave employees a full day off on Dec. 31. Christmas and New Year's Day both fell on a Tuesday that year, too.